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Drawn from the original by D. Brown, Dergaonon.

Lithographed by Marcus Ward & Co. Belfast.

ST MURA'S BELL

FIG. 2

THE BELL OF SAINT MURA.

COMMUNICATED BY

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Ancient ecclesiastical Bells are associated, in Ireland, with so much legendary lore, and regarded still with so much veneration, that their history form a curious and interesting branch of inquiry. The Bell, which is the subject of the present notice, is remarkable in several particulars, both as a work of art, and as a genuine relic of the most venerable antiquity. It was purchased about three years ago, from a person residing in Innishowen, County Donegal, near the spot where once stood the famous Abbey of Fahan, founded in the 7th century during the reign of Aodh Slaine, by Saint Mura or Muranus.—For centuries this Abbey was noted as the depository of various valuable objects which were held in especial veneration by the people. Amongst these, we are informed, were several M.S. volumes written by Saint Mura himself, and of which Colgan says “some fragments have escaped the fury of the reformers of the latter ages.” The Crozier or “Bachall” of the saint is mentioned by Sir James Ware as having been for centuries in the keeping of the O’Neills; and is believed to be the one now in the collection of Mr. John Bell, Dungannon. The only other relic of the Abbey and its founder is this Bell, which still retains much of its curious and elaborate ornamentation. It is accurately represented, of its full size, in the accompanying illustrations.

The material of the Bell itself is bronze, and the form quadrangular. From a comparison with other ancient Irish Bells, its date has been fixed conjecturally, by various experienced Antiquarians, as about the 7th century; but it is most probable that it received the *first* series of its ornaments not earlier than the 9th.—It will be observed, on referring to the illustration Fig. 2, that a portion of the ornamental work at the right hand side of the base has been displaced, revealing underneath a *second* set of decorations which are attached to the body of the Bell itself. It was the accidental removal of this corner plate that revealed the existence of the earlier workmanship. The portion disclosed is a tracery of Runic knots wrought in brass, and firmly attached to the Bell by a thin *plate of gold*. Whether the remainder of the early decorations, now concealed, be similar, cannot be determined without removing the outer plates, which might cause an irreparable injury. This *fixed* ornamentation is a great peculiarity, and must have been the result of a feeling of extreme veneration for the object so decorated: as it was thus set

* The present proprietor of the Bell. It was sent by him, last year, to the Exhibition of Irish Antiquities, in the Belfast Museum, (during the Meeting of the British Association,) and attracted much notice.

apart for purposes more sacred than those to which ordinary Bells are applied. The upper series of ornaments which encase the Bell (but of which a portion is lost,) are evidently of a style two centuries later. It is difficult to assign a reason for the addition of these decorations, except that some circumstances may have enhanced the value of the relic and increased the religious veneration in which it was held; and that this feeling was manifested by enriching it with still more costly embellishments. These exterior ornaments consist of a number of detached silver plates of various sizes, diversely embossed in the style known to have prevailed in the 11th century. The centre is adorned with a large crystal or Irish diamond set with great skill; and on either side of this, as well as at the lower corners and the centre of the base, were originally set smaller gems, the places of which are now vacant, with one exception. That which remains is a fine specimen of rich cherry-coloured amber. The entire tracery on the plates is of excellent workmanship, and the form of the Cross is seen conspicuously introduced. The arched top, also of silver, has on its summit three raised oblong figures surmounting a scroll, similar in pattern to that of the tracery on the left hand lower corner of the front. This scroll-work is filled in with a dark composition, giving it somewhat of the appearance of mosaic. The extremities or continuations of the arched top are of brass, beneath which the bordering attached to the hooks (for suspending the Bell) is made of silver; the intervening spaces being occupied by a plate of the same metal. The two larger spaces in *front* of the arched top were most probably filled with precious stones, as the gold setting still remains entire.—The ornaments on the *back* consist of figures engraved on silver, gilt: the execution is rude, and no conjecture has been offered as to the objects intended to be represented. (See Fig. 1.)

Several legends are connected with St. Mura's Bell. It has no tongue;—but tradition says that when it appeared at first, descending on earth from the celestial regions, its approach was announced to mortals by its loud ringing. A large concourse of people were assembled, expecting the arrival of some unearthly visitant. The object approached nearer and nearer, until at length the Bell appeared visibly; but, when almost within reach, it suddenly ceased to ring, and the tongue was observed to detach itself from it, and return towards the skies. Hence it was concluded that the Bell was never to be profaned by sounding on earth, but was to be kept for purposes more holy, and more beneficent. In fact, from time immemorial, this Bell has had attributed to it mysterious power in alleviating human suffering. It has been regularly used by women of the district previous to their confinement; a drink out of it being considered an infallible safeguard against danger. It is well known that it was used very extensively for this purpose, for miles round the locality where it was kept: and when a former attempt was made to obtain it from its late keeper,—whose poverty rendered him willing to part with it,—a serious disturbance was excited among the people of the neighbourhood, and he was compelled to retain it. Subsequently, his increasing poverty, combined with other circumstances, led him to dispose of it, and it passed into the possession of the present owner.